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The Gospel Mission :

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S E R M O N.

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[1861]

The Gospel Mission ;
O R
The Testimony of the Spirit, essential to the
Imposition of Hands :

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PREACHED
Before the LORD BISHOP of LONDON,
AND
The CANDIDATES for HOLY ORDERS,
AT THE
GENERAL ORDINATION, holden by his
Lordship in the Chapel of FULHAM PALACE,
June 21, 1795.

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“HOW CAN THEY PREACH, EXCEPT
THEY BE SENT?”

IT is among the misfortunes which have pursued our Church, and which more or less pursue the wisest and best establishments of human virtue—that integrity of motive has not uniformly influenced those who have aspired to the discharge of its public functions. Wanton choice, and worldly interest—the prospect of reputable indolence, and the hopes of easy gain,—have too frequently introduced into the sanctuary of God, men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith; men who owned, or sought, no spiritual influence; and whose
fruits

fruits have abounded to the mischief of the Church in the corruption of moral virtue, and the discredit of evangelical truth.

It must on the other hand be acknowledged, that great and illustrious has been the number of those, who, in standing up between the living and the dead, have obeyed the noblest impulse humanity can feel; who, in seeking the *honours*, have sought the *mantle*, of a prophet; and, whilst they demanded the sublimest employ, coveted also the best gifts.

The evidence of their mission has in such been announced, by scriptural doctrine—Christian zeal—and beneficial fruits.

Their *doctrine* has laid the gospel-axe at the root of corruption, and destroyed the illusion of flesh and sense. The divinity of their Head, and his perfect atonement, have formed the ground and basis of their creed. For this they have contended, as the sole foundation that hath been, or can be laid; as the security alike, of gospel truth and gospel promise; as the only ground-work of present confidence, and pledge of future glory.

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Their *zeal* has united, the gentleness of persuasion, with the energy of remonstrance. As ambassadors for Christ—they have blended their personal, with their public interests; and sought the salvation of others, with a diligence which might seem to involve the expectancy of their own: studious of preserving, the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace; and cementing by charity, what had been founded in faith.

The *fruits* of these, have been evident and abundant. The word—thus rightly divided—has, in their hands, run and been glorified: signs following have been seen, in those who believed; and the Lord has added daily to the Church, such as should be saved.

To such a *mission*, characterized by such *doctrine*, evidenced by such *zeal*, and crowned with such *fruits*; the words of our text emphatically point: they offer a ground and authority for believing, that a holy influence must ever sanctify the approved and successful *preacher*—that the Lord of the harvest must *himself* appoint those labourers that shall enter into his harvest; and, that

he, who gave the word of old, and great was the company of the preachers; must clothe, in every age, his priests with righteousness,—and make his ministers a flame of fire.

The truth of these premises may be fairly established by considering,

I. The insuperable *difficulties* attending the preaching of the gospel, by the *unassisted* rules of human reason:

II. The *magnitude* of the office, in its final consequences; as involving the salvation of man, and the glory of God:

III. The general *testimony* in favour of this doctrine.

I. The *difficulties* which obstruct the duties of a gospel preacher, are,

1. The prejudices he has to encounter. The condition of man, is that of a being, fallen from primitive righteousness and perfect reason. By the dread contagion of sin and degeneracy, an awful veil has passed upon the human mind: darkness covers the land, and gross darkness the people.

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The image of God—that type and copy of celestial purity—became by transgression effaced; and left a void, into which have entered those spirits of darkness, whose arts are subtle, and whose name is legion. The countenance of Jehovah, which once illumined the understanding, and shed the beams of knowledge and intelligence around the soul—is now succeeded by those vain imaginations, which are only evil continually; by that delusion, which worketh mightily and successfully, in the children of disobedience. Pride—alike the offspring and the parent of corruption—clothes the soul with an imaginary importance; dresses out its faculties, in attributes of ideal majesty; and effacing the record of its lost perfection, teaches it to confound the solemn distinctions, which God has ordained;—to call light darkness, and darkness light; sweet bitter, and bitter sweet.—Hence the difficulty of moulding the man—by the simple process of natural reason—to just and required submission. A host of prejudices combine, in favor of human dignity: all the passions of the heart unite,

in this its supposed defence;—assisted by vices of long familiarity, and habits of inveterate establishment. The mind, perverted by this baneful discipline, opposes the light of gospel truth; and labours to stifle, with fatal industry, that sorrow which is after a godly sort, and that repentance which leadeth unto life.

2. The nature of that system which he is pledged to establish.

The institutes of Christ, though benign in their object, are peremptory in their tone: they breathe the language of an high and spiritual legislation; and seek no access to human favour, by an humiliating compromise with prejudice and feeling.

The *truths* they reveal are mysteries, inscrutable to worldly wisdom; positions grounded rather upon record than demonstration; in whose discussion the powers of the mind enjoy but a limited privilege, and reason finds only a subordinate employ.

The *principles* they set up are stern in their exactions, and extensive in their jurisdiction; they refuse to coalesce with car-

nal corruptions, or to temporize with natural lusts. Issuing from the fountain of holiness and power, they seek an influence over the whole man; and demand a throne within the heart before which every idol of flesh and sense must bow.

It is the praise—no less than the character—of Christ, that the homage he owns must have no pollution, and no reserve; his anger kindles at the divided offering; his vengeance smokes against the prevaricating vow. He is not served till his *yoke* is assumed;—he is not followed till *all* is forsaken;—*doubting*, when he commands, is *disobedience*; and *looking back*, when he conducts, *apostacy*.

By such a system, the natural bias, and prejudice of the heart, will not be readily soothed into compliance: it is difficult indeed to foresee, upon human calculation, how every advance towards its enforcement by natural instruments, should not strengthen the league of iniquity; and draw more closely the bonds of rebellion.

To these must be added,

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3. The *changes* required to be produced.

The gospel—as it comes not in the enticing words of *human* wisdom—so it rests not content with *human* effects. Were its object attained by the simple demonstration of its speculative truth,—then might the functions of the Christian Preacher be justly ranked with the accustomed rules of argument and persuasion. But rational conviction is amongst the elements only of religious faith; and he who acknowledges the Christian verity, has no higher evidence of having passed from death unto life than those apostate spirits, who—like him—believe, and tremble. The fact is, that the word of which we are the professed and ostensible guardians, is not a tissue of amusing novelties, but a register of solemn and operative laws. Its end is not answered by the hearing of the ear; its terms are not embraced by the acquiescence of the understanding. It demands a *faith*, and an *obedience*, connected in their operation, yet distinct in their character; and respectively productive and demonstrative of each other.

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The *faith* it claims—is not the credence of abstract truths, nor the admission of demonstrable facts. It is a principle of strong and virtuous efficacy; standing, not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God: a principle which fastens on the promise of him who cannot lie,—on the oath of him who cannot retract; which grasps the hand held out to save,—and seizes the sceptre extended to deliver; which perfects divine strength in human weakness,—and finds a substance in things hoped for,—a reality in things not seen.

Gospel *obedience* is, on the other hand, equally pure with gospel *faith*. It is not the changeful garb of ostentatious sanctity:—it is not the forced, the formal, or the equivocal service:—it is not the adoption of favourite duties, nor the assumption of particular graces. It is the full and voluntary devotion of life and manners; the cordial and complete reception of the gospel and its contingencies,—of Christ and his cross. It is the prompt affection, the compliant will; the study of advancement, and the progress to perfection:—it is passing
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from elements and principles—to practice and fruits; from the babe in Christ, to the perfect man: it is adding to faith—knowledge; to knowledge—virtue: it is growing up, by gradual transformation, into the image of our Head; and completing holiness, in the fear of God.

If then such be the prejudices to be encountered, the principles to be established, the changes to be produced; who, with the ordinary resources of human rhetoric, is sufficient for these things? Were the bias of the mind of slight and casual creation;—were the temper of the gospel of pliant and accommodating character;—were the effects demanded of transient and superficial impression,—art and study might be amply sufficient for all the necessities of the Christian Preacher; and the issue of the gospel might then be committed to those rules and instruments, by which the ordinary business of human reasoning is administered:—but characterized—as they respectively are—by circumstances and features which have no parallel in ordinary life,—they require to their management a species of eloquence,
which

which shall pass the limits of rational persuasion: combining the influence of God with the energies of man; and superadding to the form of sound words, the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

II. The magnitude of the office, in respect to its *final* consequences; as involving the salvation of man—and the glory of God.

1. The salvation of man.

The Christian dispensation is a scheme and system of deliverance and redemption; and its publication among mankind is founded—in relation to the whole race of Adam—upon necessities the most urgent, and dangers the most alarming. Unfolding the councils of justice and of mercy—it announces the ruinous malignity of natural guilt, and the saving efficacy of Divine grace. It exposes the history of past corruption—and manifests the secrets of future retribution—in all their just and faithful realities: restricting the prospect of pardon and favour to the single virtue of an atoning sacrifice; and confining within the
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Christian vocation, the hopes of deliverance from the wrath to come.

Such is the scale which he must poise, who fills up the functions of a gospel Preacher: Judge ye then, whether an arm of flesh could fitly hold that awful balance, whose contents on either hand present, the sum of attainable joys—the aggregate of possible miseries; incalculable anguish—unfathomable bliss; agonies, beyond remedy; extasies, without end. The office he discharges, clothes him with an importance, which nature could ill sustain: it arms him with thunders of wrath; and dresses him out in beams of mercy: he is the messenger of terror, and the ambassador of peace: upon his accents hang, the fates of immortal spirits; and the word he divides, must ultimately become, the favour of life unto life, or of death unto death. As he prescribes, the wound may be gangreened or cured; as he directs, the malady may be subdued or increased: the broad, or the narrow track, may be filled as he instructs; and the number be augmented, of those who are hardened to perdition—or of those

those who believe, to the saving of their souls.

Connected with this object is,

2. The glory of God.

Creation, doubtless, in all its extent, proclaims Jehovah's praise; and Nature, throughout her universal empire, advances and accomplishes the glory of her Lord. But Human Redemption, in the mystery of its plan, and the magnitude of its event—must involve a portion of Jehovah's glory, beyond calculation and parallel. For the *glory of God*—mankind were, *peculiarly*, made; for his good pleasure—they are, and were created. Sin disturbed the blissful order, in which their first devotions flowed; and polluted by transgression, the righteous homage of their primitive vows. The works of God now seem to lapse in ruin:—evil is suffered to finish that deformity which it had begun; and to diffuse the contagion of guilt and corruption throughout that race—originally designed as models of spiritual perfection, and instruments of Jehovah's praise. But human wisdom darkly

scans the councils of the Most High: evil, which obstructs the visible progress, advances the real issues, of his designs: His foresight calculates the mischiefs which assail his sovereign purposes; and turns the tide of seeming ill, in favour of his own glory. Such was the fact, in respect to man: help was laid, in this extremity, upon one that is mighty; and the arm of omnipotence, when none appeared to deliver — itself brought salvation. Christ — the son of Jehovah, the word of eternity, the branch of the indivisible Godhead — supplied the awful necessity, of suffering and obedience. *He* filled up the void, from which man had fallen; encountered the vengeance which man had provoked: the attributes of heaven, were glorified by his offering; the good pleasure of the Lord prospered in his hands: and the events of time are hastening the fullness of his kingdom — the long expected æra of righteousness and peace — when, evil subdued and enemies vanquished, — the top-stone of Redemption shall be brought forth with shout-

ing ; the Son himself resign his mediatorial sceptre, and God—in the glory of his natural attributes—be all in all.

If then the gospel involve such great and momentous issues : if its publication be designed, to announce the embassy of Redemption ; and to advance the triumphs of Jehovah : if it be to separate the wheat from the tares, and to lead many sons to glory : if it be, to bring into the spiritual fold, the lost sheep of Jew and Gentile ; and to gather up, the straggling members of that mystical church, whose notes shall hereafter swell the hallelujahs of heaven :—how august, how important the mission ! how full of moment its every function : how passing the powers of man ; how worthy the inspiration of God !

III. The general testimony of all ages favours the belief of this doctrine.

The Divine Records offer abundant testimonies, in behalf of a spiritual influence, presiding over the selection, and inspiring the services—of religious instructors ; and in no period can we discover, that the pub-

lic functions of devotion were sustained but by those, in whom some signs and characters existed, or seemed to exist, of a preternatural commission.

Under the first dispensation; in which rites and ceremonies, the figures and shadows of good things to come, prevailed—the will of Heaven was in this instance consulted, by appropriating the services of the temple to a peculiar race—a holy priesthood;—and confining the public offices of religion to those, on whom the graces of sanctity were supposed to descend, by right of inheritance. Collateral instruction was indeed dealt out, by Seers and Prophets; yet these were acknowledged, in proportion only to their real or supposed inspiration: and the respect they found, turned upon that share of demonstration alone, by which they evinced the divinity of their mission.

Moses demurred to the Divine command, till he should first have received the power of demonstrating the reality of his designation: and Elisha deemed, in conformity to this rule,—that the noblest bequest, which as a prophet he could inherit,

was,

was, a double portion of his master's spirit.

It was this holy influence—operating in sundry forms and divers manners—that produced the mighty effects of Patriarchal virtue, and endued with spiritual eloquence, the fathers and the founders of the Israelitish Church. It was this which enabled Enoch to divulge the coming of the Lord with ten thousand of his saints: it was this which inspired the virtuous Noah, to become a Preacher of righteousness, and build an ark to the saving of his house: it was this which whispered the call to the infant Samuel;—which poured the holy oil on the head of David;—and touched the lip of Isaiah, with the coal of fire. These all obeyed the inward impulse of the Holy Ghost, and spake the language of counsel and of prophecy, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The *latter* dispensation—superior in all its discoveries and doctrines—enjoys an equal superiority in its gifts and graces. Distinguished in its history by an effusion of the Spirit, transcendently miraculous in its amplitude

plitude and its fruits; it assigns to this Spirit an important influence over all the means and duties of evangelical instruction. Conversion of heart and renovation of mind, the root and principle of religious faith, are ascribed to the operation of that Spirit, which acteth where it listeth; and is rendered visible, only in its effects. Further—the growth and progress of this implanted grace, the Godly walk, and Christian conversation, are referred to that influential and potent Spirit, which, while Paul may plant, and Apollos water, alone can give the increase. God who worketh in us to will, worketh in us also to do; and those who have been renewed by the Spirit, are equally considered to walk in the Spirit. Lastly, the fruits themselves of this *disposition* and this *walk* — the light that shineth before men—the work of faith and the labour of love—are attributed to the same Almighty yet unseen agent: for love, joy, peace, long-suffering, and other the manifest effects of Christian devotion, are classed amongst those fruits of the Spirit, against which there is no condemnation and no law.

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If therefore—such, and so universal, *have been* the operation of the Holy Spirit: if such be *yet* its destined province, in building and establishing the mystical church; with what foundation can it ever be pretended, that a more than ordinary portion of its influence, should not possess the bosoms of those who are the visible instruments of its operation? Doubtless, the hand which rules the world, which proportions the means to the end—the grace to the need—the strength to the day—will dispense a larger measure of holy unction to those who lead, than those who follow; and while he consecrates the meanest member, by the sanctifying graces of his good spirit,—will make his ministers, in a more perfect degree, temples of the Holy Ghost.

Such are the grounds on which we rest our belief of a celestial influence,—a presiding Spirit,—in the selection and appointment of Christian preachers: a judgment sanctioned by the venerable creed and testimony of our illustrious reformers; and supported by that antient and scriptural discipline whose institutes we obey.

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Let us then, who seek the imposition of hands, devoutly own this holy influence, and bow before this presiding Spirit. Be our exertions directed, in the fulfilment of our public duties, to quicken the languid pulse of devotion—to check that iniquity which abounds—to animate that love which is waxing cold—and to strengthen that faith which is ready to fail.

And let our prayers unite with our labours, to secure an abundant harvest of gospel fruits: let our supplications ascend to the Father of Lights, the author and dispenser of every grace; that the sensible evidences of the Holy Spirit may be revived among us;—that the times of refreshing may again be seen from the presence of the Lord;—and that Sun of Righteousness enlighten us, which rose on the primitive church with healing in his wings.

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